

Chapter 270

Some Secrets Change You Forever

Jason let Shade drive through the dark and the rain. The dark did not obscure his vision, but he trusted Shade more than himself to drive safely in the wet. He also didn't want to drive distracted; his visit home had left him contemplative and sober.

"We should do this trip again when the weather's better," he said. "And during the day. The Pacific Coast Drive is one of the greats."

As Jason's soul had grown stronger, the connection to his familiars had grown stronger in turn. Even with the current strength, the connection wasn't the equal of a bonded familiar, but he could feel them more than ever. They could likewise feel him and the emotional turmoil raging beneath his placid façade.

They did not know Jason's complicated family history, and he doubted Colin and possibly Gordon could even understand if they did. What they did understand was the feeling it engendered. He felt them urge him on with feelings of support, smiling as he sent back his own feelings of gratitude. It was a comfort to have his strange but loyal companions on side.

Despite the wet conditions, Shade had no regard for speed limits and every confidence in his ability, so Jason had arrived in Sydney before the bars stopped accepting people. Sydney was also suffering a downpour, so Jason's umbrella was floating along behind him.

The Stone Wall was bar in Sydney's King's Cross. A remnant of the wilder days before the lockout laws, it was a bastion of the old rough and dirty days. Working the door was a small mountain, in the form of a Māori dressed all in black.

"Hey, bro," the bouncer said. Despite his towering figure, he had a high-pitched voice. His thick New Zealand accent made his use of the word 'bro' friendly and amiable, rather than frat-boy douchebag. "How's your umbrella stay up like that?"

Jason glanced at the magic item floating next to him. "Probably magnets."

"Sweet. You coming inside?"

"I'm looking for Hiro Asano," Jason said. "Last I heard, he was running this place."

"No worries, bro; I'll give him a call. Who should I say is looking for him?"

"His nephew."

"Okay, give me a sec."

The big man fished a phone from his pocket and made a call.

“Hey, it’s Taika. I’ve got someone here looking for you. Says he’s your nephew.”

The bouncer looked Jason over.

“Good-looking half-Japanese bloke, yeah.”

“he covered the phone with his hand.

“Are you Kaito?” Taika asked

“I’m the other one. Jason.”

The bouncer went back to his call.

“He says he’s the other one. Yeah, Jason.”

The big man winced at whatever came through from the other end, then put his phone away.

“He’s says Jason is dead, bro. He sounded pretty angry that someone was claiming to be his dead nephew. Said he’s sending Growl down here. My advice to is make yourself scarce before he gets here.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.”

“If you say so. I’m Taika, by the way. Like the director, but I don’t make films.”

“Jason Asano.”

“You really Hiro’s dead nephew?”

“The trick is to not stay dead.”

“I can see how that would be useful. You might needing that soon.”

On cue, a hulking white guy came striding out of the bar. He wasn’t as big as Taika, but looked like a clump of muscle that gained sentience, bought a tank top and started getting tattoos.

“Is this the guy?” Growl asked in a voice that could have surfaced a gravel road.

“This is the guy,” Taika said.

“I thought you might have warned him to run,” Growl said.

“I did,” Taika said. “He responded with a casual lack of concern that suggests either he has no idea what he’s in for or that he knows something we don’t.”

Growl looked Jason up and down. Even after growing a few centimetres taller with his ascension to bronze rank, Jason was not a large man. His lean muscle was well hidden under the excellent drape of his suit.

“You think this guy is some kind of arse-kicker?” Growl asked sceptically.

“I’ve seen movies, bro. Huge white dude goes to beat up a little Asian bloke? He’s probably one of them secret kung-fu guys. Trained in a hidden mountain temple or something.”

Jason watched the exchange with a bemused smile.

“What are you smirking at?” Growl asked him. He grabbed Jason by the arm and dragged him towards an alley. Jason let himself be pulled along, out of sight of the street.

“Mr Asano doesn’t like people pretending to be his dead family members,” Growl said. “First, you’re going to tell me what you’re up to. Then I’m going to make very clear the degree to which Mr Asano is upset.”

“What I’m here for is easy,” Jason said with a sinister chuckle as his face took on a malevolent cant. “My job was to get you away from Asano while the others go in through the back.”

“What?” Growl asked, then his eyes wet wide. He swore as he sprinted out of the alley. Jason followed at a casual stroll. When he reached Taika, the big man was looking at the door growl had just barrelled through.

“Did you kung fu Growl?”

“I just told him a little porky pie,” Jason said, moving under the awning over the door and closing his umbrella. “Nice to meet you, Taika. I’m going to go in.”

“Okay, bro.”

Jason followed Growl’s aura through what turned out to be a loud and crowded bar. There was enough people that no one noticed the umbrella vanish as he returned it to his inventory. Growl had rushed passed a pair of beefy men standing in front of a doorway, who blocked Jason’s way when he went to follow.

Jason couldn’t be bothered dealing with them, giving them just enough aura suppression to severely unnerve them without causing any real harm. The pair, suddenly terrified of Jason for reasons they didn’t understand, quickly moved out of his way. Jason went through the door and up the stairs, where he heard an angry voice.

“No, no one has come in through the back. With security door back there, they’d have better luck coming through a wall. This is why you never move up, Growl. The only muscle you never work out is your damn brain!”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Uncle Hiro,” Jason said stepping into the office where Growl was looking sheepish. Sitting behind a desk was Jason uncle. Hiro’s criminal connections had made him a black sheep of the family and Jason hadn’t seen him since before he had left for university seven years ago.

“Jason?”

Hiro came around the desk, tilting his head back and forth as he examined Jason’s face.

“Is it really you?”

“It’s me, Uncle Hiro.”

Hiro blinked a couple of times, then collected Jason into a hug before letting him go, putting his hands on Jason's shoulders.

"You can go, Growl."

"Are you sure?" Growl asked.

"Yes, Thomas."

Growl flinched at the use of his real name and slinked away.

"How did you get past the guys downstairs?" Hiro asked.

"I'm very intimidating," Jason said unconvincingly.

Hiro closed the door behind Growl and waved Jason into a seat. Hiro's office was decorated quite differently to the grimy aesthetic of the downstairs bar. It had exposed brick, stained wood and subdued art. His chair was old school leather, practically a throne. Jason's own chair was very comfortable, by the standards of someone who didn't own a house made of magic clouds.

"It's incredible to see you Jason," Hiro said. "Even before all this, it had been too long. The memorial service was the first time I saw your father in years. We keep in touch at least a little, now. Your grandmother still won't have anything to do with me."

"You did send a huge man to beat me up," Jason said. "You aren't exactly a model citizen."

"I am sorry about that, but you handled Growl well enough. He's not sharp, but that's acceptable in a blunt instrument."

"But he's a giant tool either way," Jason said.

"Still a smart-arse, I see."

"Yeah," Jason said. "I took a look at dumb-arse but decided to go the other way."

Hiro chuckled.

"It's definitely you, alright. You've changed a lot since I last saw you, though. You finally grew into that chin."

"Why is everyone so focused on my chin?"

"Are you kidding? You could have drilled for oil with that thing. Did you have some work done?"

"What work?"

"Like chin-reduction surgery."

"I did not have chin-reduction surgery!"

Hiro chuckled, then his face grew more serious.

"What happened to you, Jason? Where have you been? Why hasn't anyone heard from you?"

“Those questions have very complicated answers,” Jason said. “For the moment, let’s just say that I’ve been doing some work in a place completely cut off from outside communication. I didn’t even know people thought I was dead until I talked to your guys downstairs.”

“Didn’t the rest of the family tell you?”

“You’re the only one who knows I’m back. What does everyone think happened to me?”

“There was a gas explosion in your building. It wiped out your apartment entirely and a good chunk of the one around yours, but you were the only death.”

“My building didn’t have gas service,” Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“That’s what your sister said. She threw up a big stink about it, but the feds were adamant.”

“Feds?”

“Your apartment blew up when there was one of those terrorist response exercises going on nearby. It was one of the first ones, actually.”

“What terrorist response exercises?”

“You really were out of contact weren’t you?” Hiro asked. “It’s been going on for more than a year, now. The army has been deploying forces all over the country for what they’re calling terrorist response exercises. It’s been happening in other countries, too, all over the world. There’s all this speculation going around that there’s some kind of anticipated attack, but more than a year later and nothing. But since one of them took place near your apartment at the same time, the federal police got involved.”

“And?”

“A lightning quick investigation,” Hiro said. “They said it was a gas explosion and closed it out by the end of the day. Erika pushed for more information, but the feds pushed back. Hard, from what I hear. They told her to back off in no uncertain terms.”

“Well that’s only very suspicious,” Jason mused. Clearly, the destruction was caused by the astral event that sent him hurtling into another reality, but why were people covering it up? Was there someone out there who knew about magic and spent their time hiding any manifestations of it?

“Why come to me?” Hiro asked. “I’m flattered, but why not your parents or your sister?”

“Like I said, I’ve been out of contact. I need to know what I’m walking into before I make my grand reappearance. I figured you could help me, and would be more willing to take ‘please don’t ask’ for an answer.”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“Is Erika living in Mum and Dad’s house now?”

“She is,” Hiro said. “You went by?”

“I took a look, but didn’t go in. Where are Mum and Dad living? Don’t tell me they moved to Tasmania, too?”

Hiro face took on an awkward expression.

“Sorry, Jason, but your parents divorced a year ago. I’m not really sure of the details, but your father bought a large property as a landscaping project and he’s been living in a little cottage on-site. Your mother moved up to Castle Heads.”

“Damn,” Jason said.

“So, what do you need?” Hiro asked. “Some cash? A place to stay while you get organised?”

“They would both be great,” Jason said. “I’ve been working, but they didn’t pay me in Australian dollars.”

“You can’t do a currency exchange?”

Jason placed a gold bar on Hiro’s desk.

“I was hoping you could help me move it,” Jason said. “Obviously I don’t expect market rates.”

“Jesus, Jason. What have you gotten caught up in? I’m meant to be the dodgy one.”

“I haven’t been doing anything criminal,” Jason said. “Except secretly leaving the country, I guess, but that wasn’t really my choice. I’ve been doing security work. In Africa.”

Hiro reached forward, using both hands to heft the ten kilo bar that Jason had lightly rested on the table with one.

“You were paid a bar of gold to secretly leave the country, and what? Be a security guard?”

“Security contractor.”

“A mercenary? Jason, do have any idea how insane that sounds?”

Jason laughed.

“Uncle, your smart enough to know that I’m skirting around the edges of the truth. It isn’t that I want to hide anything from you, but that the reality would make what I’m telling you now seem as extraordinary as eating a microwave dinner and going to bed early.”

“Jason, seeing you eat a microwave dinner would be extraordinary. Why don’t you try me?”

Jason shook his head. “I’m not looking to lie to you, Uncle Hiro, but I need to give things more consideration to before I start telling anyone anything.”

“Alright,” Hiro said. He took a money clip from a drawer and tossed it over the desk to Jason. Then he tapped his fingers on the gold bar.

“Leave this with me and I’ll see what I can do. It’s not my area, so I’ll have to ask around. Just so you know, I may get asked where it came from by people I can’t keep the answer from.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I can handle people.”

Hiro looked at his nephew. There had always been an insecurity buried under the layers of lunatic wit, but no trace of that remained. There was an almost domineering confidence in the way he carried himself. In his line of work, Hiro had developed a good instinct for dangerous people. Those instincts were screaming at him right now.

“I’ll have Taika take you somewhere you can get some sleep,” Hiro said. “I have a townhouse I keep for important guests. Do you have a phone?”

“No.”

“I’ll see you get one. A laptop, too. If you need anything else, Taika will sort you out.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“You know, I’d like to hear what really happened, some time.”

“I’m not sure you’d be glad once you did,” Jason said. “Some secrets change you forever.”